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EAST TIMOR -- SOME IMPRESSIONS

Tourists to East Timor can be forgiven for thinking that all is well in East Timor. All they have to do is assume that as in Australia, freedom of speech is guaranteed and rarely punished by imprisonment and never by death. It would help too if they ignore the virtual absence of Timorese participation in an economy controlled by the military and ethnic groups from outside Timor, and the appallingly low standard of living of the majority Timorese when compared to the various ethnic minorities in East Timor. Only then could the kind words spoken about Indonesia, Pancasila and Bapak Suharto by people afraid to tell the truth be believed.

I feel privileged to have heard and seen the truth of Indonesia's occupation in East Timor even if only superficially. The following are some sights and sounds of East Timor from October 11-13 that will remain with me always.

A taxi full of 9 Timorese men who initially chorused "good, good" to the question "What is it like in East Timor now?" but then smiled profusely and nodded as I gave my critique of the current situation.

Others who spoke of the resistance in Viqueque, Baucau, Los Palos and underground in Dili. One had been detained in May in Los Palos for 'being false' as he said with a rueful grin. "Saya tidak bisa tahu" (I cannot know) was his tongue cheek answer to further questions. [27 Timorese people from Los Palos were detained for supporting the resistance in May/June this year]. He is not permitted to return to Los Palos.

The Pope's first arrival in Dili in order to change aircraft for his October 11 Mass in Maumere, Flores was memorable as an anti climax when the head of state of the Vatican City did not recognise East Timor as an independent country as does his state. The fact that His Holiness did not kiss the ground was enough to rate a mention in the Jakarta Post the next day. There not being any local media prevented any local coverage of the fact.

That afternoon Governor Carascalao spoke of ABRI's second function as a social institution. Perhaps the 100 or so men who left the temporary barracks near my hotel bearing metal truncheons and wooden clubs earlier that afternoon were part of that second function.

The truckloads of Timorese people who seemed to be revelling in the relative freedom of movement and association within the confines of the midnight curfew and the city's boundaries (which were closed on the 10th October). The contrasting swarms of sombre faced soldiers showed that to ABRI the Papal visit was not a carnival.

The crowd choreographers who ordered the faithful to wave their specially provided Indonesian flags or directed the security forces to surround areas of surging crowd at Tasi Tolu. The clenched fists and exuberance of the worshippers who savoured the tase of power albeit spiritual and not political.

The protesting Fretilin supporters whose courage and ingenuity at smuggling in protest banners show that for some the fear of death is not enough to stop the heart from speaking.

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The truckload of gunbearing soldiers and machine gun carrying soldiers on foot who passed by my hotel after curfew the night after the Pope had left Dili.

History retold according to the Department of Misinformation - "There was an APODETI protest at Tasi Tolu" was the story related by a hotel employee.

Finally and most memorably the words of a Timorese - "The protesters yesterday were very courageous. At the moment there are not enough people with courage. We can wait. We can wait for true independence".

Chris McMahon
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